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EDITORIALS

State prisons
and lawsuits

THE ISSUE *Alabama is ripe for another lawsuit over prison crowding. But it's not just the cost of a lawsuit that taxpayers ought to be worried about.*

Conditions at Alabama prisons are ripe for another, potentially costly federal lawsuit, the governor's task force on prison overcrowding was told last week. Prisons are overcrowded, dilapidated and understaffed, says the legal director of a group that has sued the prison system in the past and won.

But a lawsuit is not what should worry task force members the most. What's more worrisome is that there is no easy or cheap answer to even begin fixing the very serious problems that ail prisons. As daunting as the task is, those problems must be fixed.

Alabama's prisons hold twice the number of inmates — 27,732 — they were built to house. We're guarding them with about half the number of corrections officers we need. The prisons themselves are badly in need of repairs. And there is no money in the state budget to fix those problems (including the cost of defending the prison system from more lawsuits).

What is a poor state to do?

Alabama already has tried all the quick fixes — squeezing in as many inmates as possible in already overcrowded prisons; leaving prisoners in county jails for long months; speeding up paroles of nonviolent convicts; sending inmates to private, out-of-state prisons, etc. At this point, there are really only two options left: making changes to reduce the prison population or launching a massive prison-building program.

Neither option is cheap. But in a state that can't even afford to hire

adequate state troopers to patrol our highways, several new prisons are a dream.

Earlier this year, state prison Commissioner Donal Campbell asked that the prison system's annual budget be more than doubled to \$580 million, with most of the increase going to build two new prisons.

Even if there were money for new prisons, two more prisons wouldn't solve today's crowding problem, let alone deal with the rapid growth in the prison population. Just over the past year, for example, the number of prisoners has risen by about 1,300 inmates — enough to fill one prison.

If we can't afford to build our way out of this prison mess, we'd better put more effort into keeping people out of prison. Scant tax resources are best spent on alternatives to prison, such as drug treatment, alternative sentencing and community corrections programs that force some offenders who don't pose safety threats to pay for their crimes without putting an even bigger burden on crowded prisons.

A whole package of sentencing reform bills that would help make sentences more uniform and fair has been given to the Legislature. Unfortunately, the bills died in this year's legislative session after the Senate got bogged down in a filibuster.

Next year, lawmakers must make passing those bills and funding alternatives to prison a top priority — or say how they're going to find \$300 million for new prisons.